

EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY  
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WASHINGTON, D. C. 20006

August 11, 1980

MEMORANDUM FOR HEADS OF AGENCIES

SUBJECT: Analysis of Impacts on Prime or Unique Agricultural Lands in  
Implementing the National Environmental Policy Act

Approximately one million acres of prime or unique agricultural lands\* are being converted irreversibly to nonagricultural uses each year. Actions by federal agencies such as construction activities, development grants and loans, and federal land management decisions frequently contribute to the loss of prime and unique agricultural lands directly or indirectly. Often these losses are unintentional and are not necessarily related to accomplishing the agency mission.

On August 30, 1976, CEQ, in cooperation with the Department of Agriculture, issued a memorandum to the heads of federal agencies on the need for analysis of prime or unique farmlands in the preparation and review of environmental impact statements. The memorandum also recommended steps for agencies to take in making such analyses. Since that memorandum was issued, federal agencies' environmental impact statements have begun to include references to the presence of prime or unique farmlands that would be affected by the proposed federal action. Moreover, they have clearly indicated that many federal and federally assisted projects have direct and indirect adverse impacts on prime or unique farmlands.

Recent studies by the Council and the General Accounting Office indicate that federal agencies have not adequately accounted for the impacts of their proposed actions on agricultural land through the environmental assessment process. Furthermore, agency project plans and decisions have frequently not reflected the need and opportunities to protect these lands. The purpose of this memorandum is to alert federal agencies to the need and the opportunities to analyze agricultural land impacts more effectively in the project planning process and under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Agencies can substantially improve their analysis of impacts on prime or unique agricultural lands by following closely our recently established NEPA regulations (40 C.F.R. 1500-1508, Nov. 29, 1978). The regulations apply to these lands in several specific respects. Determining the effects of a proposed federal agency action on prime or unique

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\* As used in this memorandum, prime and unique agricultural land is cropland, pastureland, rangeland, forest land or other land, but not urban built-up land, which is capable of being used as prime and unique farmland as defined by the Department of Agriculture (see attachment).

agricultural lands must be an integral part of the environmental assessment process, and must be a factor in deciding whether or not to prepare an environmental impact statement. For example, when an agency begins planning any action, it should, in the development of alternative actions, assess whether the alternatives will affect prime or unique agricultural lands. Then, recognizing the importance of these lands and any significant impacts that might affect them, it must study, develop, and describe appropriate alternative uses of available resources. (Sec. 1501.2(c).)

In determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement, the regulations note that the "Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as ... prime farmlands ..." (Sec. 1508.27(b)(3)) must be considered, among others. If an agency determines that a proposal may significantly affect the quality of the human environment, it must initiate the scoping process (Sec. 1501.7) to identify those issues, including effects on prime or unique agricultural lands, that will be analyzed and considered, along with the alternatives available to avoid or mitigate adverse effects. An environmental impact statement must include a description of the area that will be affected by the proposed action (Sec. 1502.15) and an analysis of the environmental consequences of the proposal, including a discussion of "natural or depletable resource requirements and conservation potential of various alternative and mitigation measures" (Sec. 1502.16(f)). These resource requirements include prime or unique agricultural lands. The effects to be studied encompass indirect effects that may include "growth inducing effects and other effects related to induced changes in the pattern of land use ..." (Sec. 1508.8(b)). The cumulative effects of a proposal must be studied (Secs. 1508.7, 1508.8(b)), as must any mitigation measures that could be taken to lessen the impact on prime or unique agricultural lands (Secs. 1505.2(c), 1508.20). Agencies must also cooperate with state or local governments in their efforts to help retain these lands. (Secs. 1502.16(c), 1506.2(d).)

Federal agencies with technical data on the occurrence, value, or potential impacts of federal actions on these lands will provide the lead agency with data that may be useful in preparing environmental assessments or impact statements. The U.S. Department of Agriculture will cooperate with all agencies in planning projects or developments, in assessing impacts on prime or unique agricultural lands, and in defining alternatives. Technical data and assistance regarding agricultural land may be obtained by contacting the Chairperson of the USDA Land Use Committee (list attached) or any USDA office. In addition to providing technical data and assistance, the USDA will continue to emphasize the review of EISs on federal actions likely to have significant effects on prime and unique farmlands. Under Section 1504 of the regulations, "USDA should refer to CEQ those proposed federal actions which it believes will be environmentally unsatisfactory because of unacceptable effects on prime or unique farmlands. CEQ will review such referrals, and take necessary steps in accordance with Section 1504 of our regulations.

Because prime and unique agricultural lands are a limited and valuable resource, the Council urges all agencies to make a particularly careful effort to apply the goals and policies of the National Environmental Policy Act to their actions and to obtain necessary assistance in their planning processes so that these lands will be maintained to meet our current national needs and the needs of future generations of Americans.

  
GUS SPETH  
Chairman

Attachments